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EPA turns attention to Libby business cleanup

Asbestos removal slated for about 80 businesses

By BRENT SHRUM
Special to the Inter Lake

LIBBY — With the removal of vermiculite insulation in area homes well under way, the Environmental Protection Agency is turning its attention to businesses containing the asbestos-contaminated material.

About 80 businesses are slated for cleanup, local EPA project manager Jim Christiansen said at a recent Community Advisory Group meeting.

Information will be mailed to the business owners in preparation for a Jan. 12 meeting at The Venture Inn to discuss cleanup operations.

The same procedures in the residential cleanups will be used, Chris-

tiansen said. Each job is expected to last one to two weeks.

"The cleanup will be much the same, but the impacts to businesses might be different," Christiansen said. The EPA won't compensate businesses for lost revenue or relocate them during the cleanup, Christiansen said.

"We simply couldn't afford to do that and make it happen," he said.

The agency will work with each business to try to schedule cleanups at the most convenient time, however, and small things such as temporary phone lines or fax machines can be provided, Christiansen said.

At the Jan. 12 meeting, business owners will be given more detailed information, Christiansen said.

About 200 homes out of a total of 1,200 have been cleaned so far. Follow-up sampling is beginning at some of the homes already cleaned. Samples

will be analyzed to check for the presence of any asbestos fibers.

"The idea is to go back after some time has passed and see what conditions are," Christiansen said. The sampling will continue for a couple of months with a report to follow, probably in March, Christiansen said.

A visit by new EPA Administrator Mike Leavitt is also expected around that time. Christiansen said he hopes to have the visit scheduled in late February or early March.

During Leavitt's confirmation process, Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., secured a promise from the former Utah governor that he would visit Libby. Leavitt had initially scheduled the trip Dec. 5, but the visit was postponed to allow the community more time to prepare.

"I was impressed that he was willing to come to the community so quickly, but I actually thought it was

too fast," Christiansen said.

An effort to show Leavitt community support for increased funding for the Libby cleanup is being organized.

Funding for this year was \$15 million although Christiansen had requested \$20 million.

Advisory group member Gayla Benefield read aloud a draft request for letters of support from the community that will be sent to parents of Libby schoolchildren. Backers of the letter-writing campaign also will meet with community groups to solicit support.

Mike Giesey read a draft of a lengthy resolution requesting continued funding and research that will be presented to community representatives and organizations for signatures before being sent to President Bush, Montana's congressional delegation and various state and federal agencies.